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ABSTRACT

This case study focused on the effects of collaborative activities between two teachers and their students. The authors explored the effectiveness of distance learning for adolescents in promoting self-esteem, achievement, and multicultural understanding. In Cultural Connections, diverse students across Texas collaborated on multicultural activities, which helped them grow in self-esteem, achievement, and multicultural understanding. Student participants were 14 randomly placed eighth-grade students and ten gifted and talented fifth-grade students. This project demonstrated that, in networked classrooms, students can connect with distant others to learn about their perspectives and increase their multicultural understandings. Four overarching themes emerged from the data: growth, empowerment, comfort with technology, and mentorship. In addition, distance technologies can foster team teaching across cultures and geographical distances. Technology used included interactive compressed video systems, HyperStudio software, Internet connections, CU-SeeMe software, and FirstClass computer conferencing software. (Author/DLS)

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Cultural Connections: Promoting Self-Esteem, Achievement, and Multicultural Understanding Through Distance Learning

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Abstract

This case study focuses on the effects of collaborative activities between two teachers and their students. We explored the effectiveness of distance learning for adolescents in promoting: 1) self-esteem, 2) achievement, and 3) multicultural understanding. In Cultural Connections, diverse students across Texas collaborated on multicultural activities which helped them grow in self-esteem, achievement, and multicultural understanding. This project demonstrates that in networked classrooms students can connect with distant others to learn about and from their perspectives and to increase their multicultural understandings. In addition, distance technologies can foster team teaching across cultures and geographical distances.

Background and Theoretical Perspective

In this case study, we explored the effectiveness of distance learning for adolescents in promoting: 1) self-esteem, 2) achievement, and 3) multicultural understanding. In our project, Cultural Connections, predominantly Hispanic students collaborated with diverse students in various schools via interactive videoconference, desktop videoconference, and computer conference.

The theory of transformative pedagogy suggests that the fundamental purpose of education is to promote personal growth in individuals. As individuals grow through education, they transform into responsible, caring citizens who affect society positively. To facilitate building a broad world-view in students, educators need to provide collaborative learning experiences for social construction of meaning. Telecommunications can be used to expand the range of exposure to multicultural interactions (Cummins & Sayers, 1995). In addition, multimedia technologies can be used for visual/verbal sharing of ideas across distances.

Distance technologies expand the range of opportunities for students to build relationships with people of different cultures. In the current social-constructivist conception of learning, "education is the shared way of thinking about one's self, the community, and the world" (Riel, 1995, p. 219). Schools might play a significant role in nurturing students' positive identity formation by providing them with opportunities to build distant relationships. In order to become more tolerant and respectful citizens, students need to develop relationships with people from diverse cultures and backgrounds (Moffett, 1994). Geographical and cultural isolation can limit opportunities for relationship building beyond one's culture. However, cross-classroom collaboratives allow students to connect with distant others from around the world. The collaborative learning process has the potential to transform individual participant's perspectives from parochial to global (Cummins & Sayers, 1995; Metcalf, 1994).

Cultural Connections is an open forum between distant classes that use telecommunications and multimedia technologies for collaborative learning. In collaboration with university researchers, 24 teachers from three schools developed several identity forming and multicultural curricular activities for their students to conduct over the distance. For instance, they developed multimedia activities from writing activities in *I Thought I Was from Another Planet* (Dresser, 1994), a book of short stories and writing activities designed to help students develop authentic writing voices and heighten their sensitivity to our multicultural world. Students did the activities, which involved writing and distance collaboration, and ultimately produced multimedia presentations of their work which they shared with their partners over the distance.

In another activity, students participated in a distance, open forum to discuss the pros and cons of school uniforms. Students conducted library and Internet research on the topic; they surveyed campus students and faculty; they calculated means; and they formulated, developed, and presented persuasive arguments across the distance.

In Cultural Connections, multimedia software and distance technologies were used to eliminate isolation. Student development of multimedia portfolios and cross-classroom collaboration were meant to foster the building of multicultural relationships while honoring the strength of diversity and emphasizing how similarities unify.

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Research Questions

Participating teachers conducted at least nine distance learning experiences with their students over a school year. In this study we asked-- In what ways, if any, did the distance learning experiences affect 1) self-esteem, 2) school achievement, and/or 3) multicultural understanding in participating students?

Methods

Cultural Connections included Berta Cabaza Middle School in San Benito, Texas, which is located in the Lower Rio Grande Valley; Jones Intermediate School in Waller, Texas, which is located about 350 miles to the north of San Benito; and Somerville Junior High School in Central Texas. Participants in this study included 24 teachers and the 24 students of 2 of those teachers, 2 school counselors, 3 administrators, and 2 university faculty at Texas A&M University. Sixteen teachers at Berta Cabaza, six teachers at Jones Intermediate and two teachers at Somerville Junior High who teach math, science, language arts and social studies conducted Cultural Connections curricular activities. A counselor at Berta Cabaza partnered with a counselor at Somerville Junior High to conduct guidance activities. School principals and university faculty facilitated the project. All student populations in partcipating schools were racially and culturally diverse, and participating students equitably represented the ethnicity of the student populations of each school. The school and university partners were equipped with interactive compressed video systems, HyperStudio™ software, Internet connections, CU-SeeMe™ software, and FirstClass™ computer conferencing software.

This case study focuses on the effects of collaborative activities between two teachers and their students. The two teachers, one in San Benito and the other in Waller, partnered for planning and implementation of curricular activities with their students. They conducted the ongoing activities between October and June of 1996 and 1997. Fourteen randomly placed eighth grade students in San Benito and ten gifted and talented fifth-grade students in Waller were active in the project throughout the 1996-1997 academic year.

The investigation relied on ethnographic, case study methods. To determine effects of distance learning on self-esteem, achievement, and multicultural understanding, we conducted content analyses of each of the data sources. We looked for emergent themes and gained consensus on the extent to which the data sources revealed answers to the research questions. Data sources included participants' reflections, contents of videoconferences, students' HyperStudio portfolios, interviews of the students early in the school year and again at the end of the year, and evaluations of the Annual Distance Learning Videoconference attended by the 24 teachers.

In addition, to estimate the effects of Cultural Connections on achievement, we examined scores on three school benchmarking reading tests at Berta Cabaza in San Benito. The tests were administered to all students in the school as part of the school's accountability system. Only one class participated in Cultural Connections. We compared the scores of 14 students in the Cultural Connections, distance learning class with the scores of the students in the same teacher's classes that did not participate in Cultural Connections.

For purposes of this research we limited the definition of multicultural understanding to demonstrations of appreciation of others and breadth of world-view. To determine the degree of multicultural understanding, we analyzed contents of interviews and participating students' multimedia portfolios. The portfolios contained reflections about students' homes, thoughts and values, goals, likes and abilities, and stories. Students shared the contents of their portfolios via videoconference to partners at distant schools. The portfolios were under continuous construction and reconstruction by the students and served as valuable disclosures of participants' feelings.

We each color-coded contents of interviews and reflections according to recurrent themes, identified change indicators, and came together to achieve consensus. We transferred the contents of students' HyperStudio portfolios to a table with columns of text, images, and researcher comments. In the comments column, the researchers recorded impressions regarding indicators of achievement, self-esteem, and multicultural issues.

Results

We found that students' self-esteem, academic achievement, and multicultural understanding increased in response to Cultural Connections. Four overarching themes emerged from the data: growth, empowerment, comfort with technology, and mentorship. These themes permeated each data source and applied to all participants of the project. Participants grew personally and intellectually. They felt empowered to achieve goals. They became comfortable with technology, and they provided and/or received mentorship. Students mentored and learned from each other. They also had the benefit of receiving mentorship from both their local and distant teachers. Teachers, administrators, and researchers also learned from each other as we shared understandings.

Students' increased self-esteem was indicated by their heightened poise, communication, and leadership skills. One student wrote, "I'm learning to be more open, how to express my thoughts and ideas, and be clear in my speech" (SI/S4/BC). At the beginning of the school year students had used technology for little more than drill and practice. By the end of the school year they described themselves as technologically proficient in multimedia development and telecommunications, a reflection that their teachers corroborated. One student won the district wide multimedia development award.

Language in the pre-project and post-project interviews and reflections indicated transformation from self-belittlement to pride. For instance, early in the project several students compared themselves unfavorably to their distant partners. One student said, "You see them and it's like they have no problems at all" (SI/S5/BC). Another wrote that "Jones students are not nervous in front of the camera and we are" (SI/S7/BC). By the same token, Jones students indicated that Berta Cabaza students seemed more poised and less nervous. By the end of the school year students remarked that they were no longer nervous in front of a group or a camera. A representative comment in response to the question, "What are you learning from Cultural Connections," follows: "I am learning more about myself and being more aware of what and who I am. Also [I am] learning to be grateful for what I have and not be shy or nervous." She also learned to value a distant student partner on an activity; "We are friendly to each other. Both of us are creative" (SR/S7/BC).

Students' increased academic achievement was indicated by comparing scores on the benchmark reading tests administered at Berta Cabaza Middle School. Test scores in November indicated that students in the San Benito teacher's four classes had mastered the same number of reading objectives prior to initiation of Cultural Connections. We identify the four classes as DL for distance learning, class 1, class 2, and class 3. The DL group met several times with their distant partners before the second school benchmarking test was administered in January. The DL class's mean scores improved by 27%. Class 1 scores declined by 4%, class 2 scores increased by 3%, and class 4 increased by 14%. The DL class continued to meet with their distant partners prior to a third testing. When compared with means in November, the third benchmarking test administered in February showed that students in DL improved by 3%, class 1 scores declined by 9%, class 2 scores declined by 7%, and class 4 declined by 2% (see Figure 1).

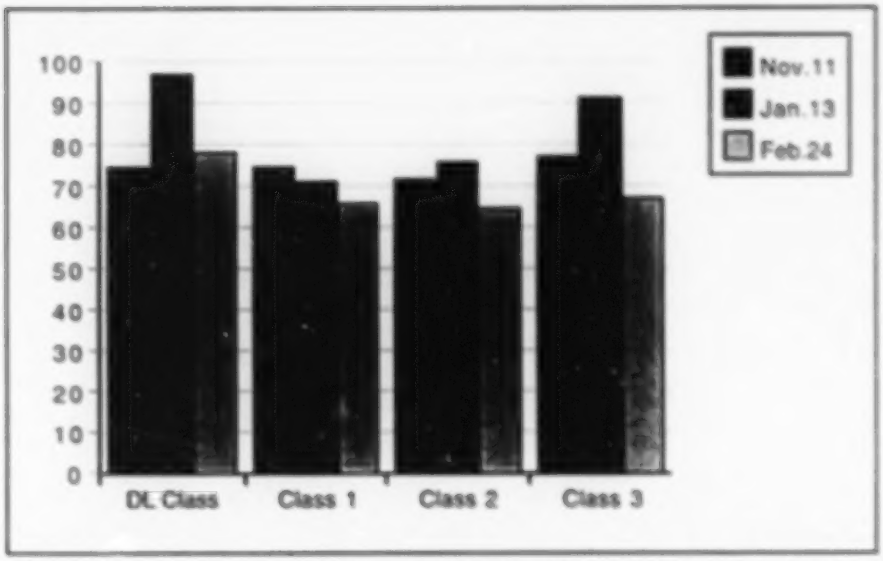

Figure 1. Mastery of reading objectives at Berta Cabaza Middle School in the distance learning class (n = 14), class 1 (n = 22), class 2 (n = 24), and class 3 (n = 24).

In addition to increased reading scores, portfolio analysis revealed that by the end of the year, 11 of the 14 Berta Cabaza students in distance learning intended to go to college and they all expressed interest in a successful career. One student wrote, "My main goal is to graduate from college. I want to be the first from my family to reach this goal. I really have confidence in myself and I believe I can do it. After graduating from college, I am hoping to get a job as a physical therapist" (P/S3/BC).

Students' increased multicultural understanding was indicated by their comments regarding themselves and others in the project. The open-ended question, "What are you learning from meeting with your distant partners for videoconferences?" elicited responses such as, "I'm learning that all people have different kinds of taste and different goals" (SR/S8/BC), "I am learning what they like to do and how they feel about things. I am learning that they have trust to show us their personal things" (SR/S2/BC), and "I am learning more ideas, new ideas, and old ideas. I am learning that many people have great ideas" (SR/S7/BC).

Language regarding distant others changed over time. Early in the project students spoke of their distant partners in generalized terms and emphasized differences. For instance, one student commented, "We're eighth graders and they're fifth graders. They speak differently and are different colors and some of their last names are weird" (SI/S6/BC). Later, their language was more personalized and comments focused on similarities: "We like the same musica and we have almost the same classes, but in different cities. We have the same taste in some food, music, and sports, and I say we all liked distance learning" (SR/S4/BC); and "Chris likes to play around and I do too. He is very funny and he is a student like me" (SR/S3/BC).

After the first meeting in November a young man responded to the question of what was learned from the distance collaboration by commenting that "Ms. Davis's students don't seem to be afraid of the camera, they are not afraid to talk" (SI/S1/BC). The statement is impersonal regarding the distant others and the student paints himself in a negative light compared to them. In May he responded to the same question by writing, "That they learn from us and we learn from them. Also they are very smart kids and I'm learning that I should change my attitude" (SR/S3/BC). This statement is more personal and illustrates both self-respect and respect for distant others.

Portfolios revealed expanded multicultural understanding over time. In one student's HyperStudio™ stack, after describing his family, house, and state, he included Earth as the larger context of his home. He wrote "It [Earth] has different climates, different geographic figures, and different people as in culture." We interpreted this broad and inclusive sense of home as reflecting a vision of world community, and therefore multiculturalism.

Educational Implications

Dewey (1938) defined growth as the ability to secure meaning from experience and to act in ways instrumental to the achievement of worthwhile ends. In Cultural Connections, diverse students across Texas collaborated on multicultural activities which helped them grow in self-esteem, achievement, and multicultural understanding. Cross-classroom collaboration made it possible for young adolescents to expand their world-views in preparation for contributing in our increasingly multicultural environment. This project demonstrates that in networked classrooms students can connect with distant others to learn about and from their perspectives and to increase their multicultural understandings. In addition, distance technologies can foster team teaching across cultures and geographical distances.

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